

Dr. King's 'I Have a Dream'

Eighth of ten installments from "The Days of Martin Luther King Jr."

Chapter VIII

By Jim Bishop

The Birmingham campaign dragged on. Dr. Martin Luther King had twenty-five assistants who left the Gaston Motel every morning to work their way through the black districts, announcing fresh and larger demonstrations, devising ways of bedeviling the community. The first sweet taste of triumph was in the mouths of the conferees, and it was difficult to contain. In the press and television the blacks were white; the whites were black. King was a gentle Jesus; Commissioner "Bull" Connor was a sadistic Satan.

King had made no attempt to discuss matters with the White Establishment. It was Deputy Attorney General Burke Marshall who requested a meeting between black and white leaders on Tuesday, May 27, 1963, at the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce. If the pastor was intransigent at the start, Marshall found that 125 white leaders were even less eager to commit themselves to any form of reconciliation.

By Friday morning Burke Marshall found both sides

ready to agree to four points: (1) desegregation of lunch counters, rest rooms, fitting rooms and drinking fountains in all downtown Birmingham stores within ninety days; (2) placement of blacks in clerical and sales jobs in stores within sixty days; (3) release of prisoners still in jail on low bail; and (4) the establishment of permanent communication between white and black leaders.

The agreement was announced by Dr. King. The dimples in his cheeks deepened as he faced the press. He looked like the winner. But surely Dr. King must have known the agreement was almost worthless. There were no Birmingham officials present. His agreement was with a group of private businessmen; the City of Birmingham was not a party to it.

The blacks would witness some desegregation in stores; here and there, an intelligent and compliant black would be promoted to a "white" job, but any biracial committee formed would have no official sanction, no authority to do anything but discuss and dissemble. The white man would settle back into his traditional ways—except in such instances as when federal law intervened—and the

black would return to the squalor of his ghetto.

For more than twenty years, A. Philip Randolph had been dreaming of an orderly, dignified march on Washington to display the power of the black man to Northern and Southern legislators. Martin Luther King was interested. So was Roy Wilkins, John Lewis of SNCC, James Farmer of CORE, Whitney Young of the Urban League, and Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women.

Randolph was determined to be the leader of the leaders, and none disputed him. The date he suggested for the march was Wednesday, Aug. 28, 1963. He selected Dr. King's onetime assistant, Bayard Rustin, to "coordinate" the march, to be assisted by Cleveland Robinson and Walter Fauntroy of the SCLC. In mid-June they began to work.

News of the March on Washington reached President John F. Kennedy and he reacted antagonistically. He called a meeting of civil rights leaders at the White House for Saturday, June 22. The writing of his civil rights bill and his speech to the nation were positive efforts to make unnecessary mass demonstrations, with their possibility of violence

and he did not want one in his backyard. He called in Randolph, Wilkins, Farmer, King, and Young. On the white side, he had Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Stephen Currier, president of the Taconic Foundation and actively interested in promoting civil rights.

The dialogue at the meeting was dominated by Randolph and John Kennedy. The amenities did not last long. The President was fairly blunt. The August march had been planned and publicized without anyone's notifying the government, a government which had gone on record as aligning itself with the Movement.

"We want success in Congress," Kennedy said, "not just a big show at the Capitol." The civil right leaders could not see the danger. Martin Luther King said the march "could also serve as a means of dramatizing the issue and mobilizing support in parts of the country which did not know the problem at first hand." He saw nothing friendly or affirmative in Kennedy's glance.

Kennedy lost the gamble. The blacks were going to hold the rally.

Robert Kennedy had a private talk with Martin Luther King and accused him of having Communists in his entourage. The doctor was surprised and promised to look into the matter.

The alliance between the administration and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was, on the surface, firm and binding. In speeches, Dr. King crowed about the "new Kennedy," a phrase which grated the President's sensitivities. A complete dossier on Dr. King, his personal habits, and his organization was being gathered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and sent to the Attorney General, who routed it directly to the President.

The order to tap King's phones came on early July. The FBI tapped the pastor's private phones and the phones of the SCLC. It also alerted its Atlanta office to shadow King. The tap was not installed until October, 1963, and from that time onward, there was little that King did or said, or that his staff did or said, that the FBI did not know and report on.

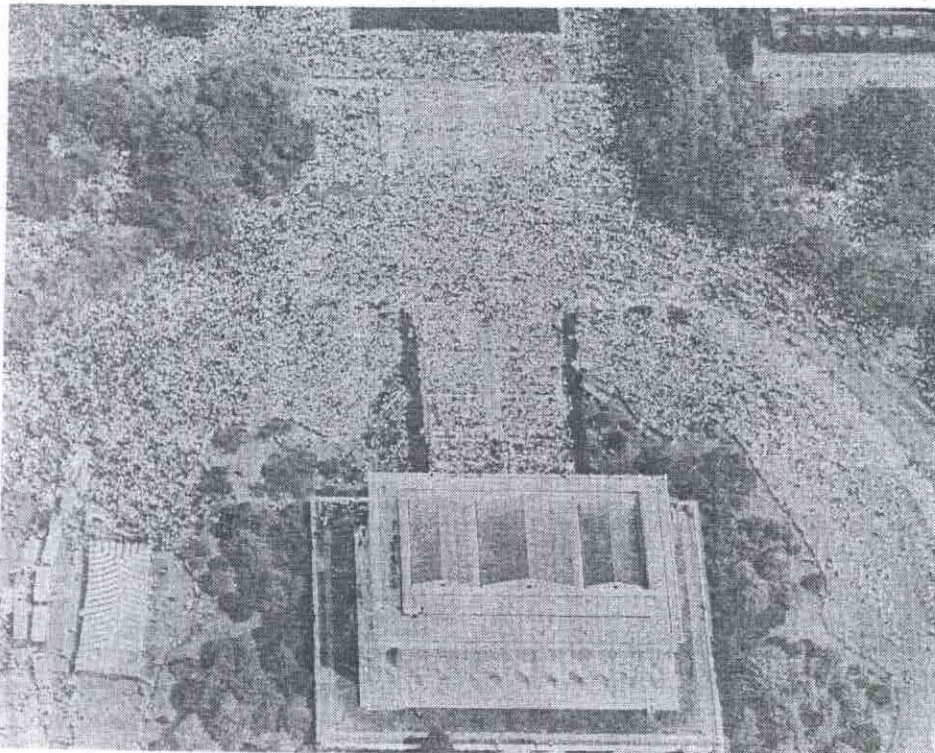
The President and his staff were worried that they were "outside" the demonstration, that the participants could become riotous after the rally. Kennedy came to a decision. He invited the black leaders back to the White House, and, after an amiable conference, publicly endorsed the March on Washington. It was a clever stroke; the March on



United Press International

President Johnson gives Dr. King one of pens used in signing voting rights bill.

Was Highlight of '63 March



Associated Press

Helicopter view of March on Washington demonstrators during ceremonies at the Lincoln Memorial on Aug. 28, 1963.

Washington became an almost official event.

The first small groups in the March on Washington were in the city at the base of Washington Monument at 1 a.m.

It was close to noon when the Kings left for the Washington Monument. More than 200,000 had gathered at the meeting place, and one of every four faces was white. There was an aura of joyous chaos. The mood of the people infected the speakers. There was no doomsday defiance in it; it was like Christmas Morning, with everyone anticipating a gift, but no one demanding a great deal. There was no order, just friendly chaos.

Dr. King was disturbed because the program, starting at 9 a.m., was going on too long. He was right. At 3 p.m. the fringes of the crowd began to walk away. It was thirty minutes past three when Randolph introduced Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a "man who personifies moral leadership." It was not a stirring introduction for the new hero from Atlanta.

King approached the microphones wearing a solemn expression. "Five score years ago," he said, "a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. But one

hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream...

"From every mountain-side, let freedom ring." His voice softened, became almost meditative, as he reached the conclusion.

"When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speak up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last!'"

The people went wild, knowing in its collective heart that "I Have a Dream" would stand as one of the most moving speeches of modern times.

On a sunny autumn day in Dallas, Texas, the President of the United States had five and a quarter inches of his head blown off by an assassin. In Atlanta, Dr. King and his wife sat magnetized to the television set all day. After the thirty-fifth Presi-

dent had been pronounced dead in Parkland Memorial Hospital, King bowed his head. "That's the way I'm going to go," he said. "I told you this is a sick society." His wife did not answer. She had lived with the possibility of his death so long that she cherished even more the few hours they had together.

In the penitentiary at Jefferson City, Missouri, a group of prisoners were talking about the assassination, paying little attention to James Earl Ray. One said, "Someone made a million dollars." Someone else said, "The man who murders King will make another million." A prisoner recalls that James Earl Ray paused, smiled, and said, "That's the million I want to collect."

President Lyndon Johnson, sitting in the Cabinet Room of the White House, took the first of an assortment of pens to sign the civil rights bill. The press gave the bulk of the credit to Martin Luther King Jr., as the President gave him one of the pens. This was not entirely so. It would be correct to state that Dr. King had brought the plight of the black to public attention. But it was the consummate politician, Southerner Lyndon Johnson, who had forced the bill through both

houses at the possible cost of losing eleven or more states in his campaign in November.

When Dr. King returned from a September visit to Berlin and Rome, he complained that he felt "tired, tired, tired." He seemed to be drained of strength, ideas, and initiative, and the sense of deep fatigue persisted. Mrs. King finally persuaded her husband to go to St. Joseph's Hospital in Atlanta for a complete checkup. On Oct. 13, in the middle of the presidential campaign between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater, the doctor checked in.

The tests proved nothing more than that the patient was tense and needed rest. On the following morning, the phone rang in the King home, and Coretta King answered. The caller identified himself as representing the Associated Press and asked to speak to Dr. King. Mrs. King replied that her husband was not at home.

"Mrs. King," the Associated Press man said excitedly, "we have just received word from Norway that your husband has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize."

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NEXT: Showdown in Selma.